

The Style of Which This is Written: Neutralization of Prepositions in English

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We have noticed a change in the use of prepositions in English. In our work with student essays, we increasingly encounter non-standard uses of prepositions, such as concern on, afraid from, and enamored with. This trend is evident in both native and non-native American English speakers. We believe that the English prepositional system is moving towards an eventual neutralization of the distinction in the prepositional category. Parallels are evident in the variability of prepositions in Old English, as well as in modern creolized languages, which exploit a few all-purpose prepositions, the meanings of which are evident by context. Our findings highlight the nature of English as always changing, as it assimilates features from each new generation of speakers. We discuss the data's implications for developmental education teachers, who are increasingly confronted with non-standard prepositional use.

English prepositions have been called “a trap for the unwary, and something of a nightmare for the foreign learner” (as cited in Mwangi, 2004, p. 27). What are prepositions? This category of function word conveys information about space, time, and direction, as well as metaphorical implications. So an object can be *on the table*, an event can be *on Wednesday*, a box can go *onto a shelf*, and a detective can be *on the case*.

In our reading of student essays at Marymount Manhattan College, we have noticed unusual pairings of verbs and preposi-

tions, such as *think to*, *based off of* and *have concerns on*. Surprisingly, these constructions are occurring in the writing of native American English speaking students of traditional age. As 65% of our student population comes from states other than New York, the changes occurring in prepositional phrases are not a reflection of a regional dialect.

Linguistic competence, our unconscious knowledge about the structure of our language, dictates what sounds well formed to us. Language users choose certain prepositions for certain constructions. In addition, our linguistic competence is dialect specific, so not all forms of English are the same. Hence, some speakers are comfortable with *different than* and others use *different from*. In other words, there is already general awareness of variation in preposition use.

Data from linguistic studies show changes in the prepositional system over time and region. The main message of these studies is that prepositions are indeed complex, variable, and have been subject to change, as is most of language. We believe our prepositional system is still changing.

RESEARCH FROM ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Much research has looked at English Language Learners (ELL) tackling that trap and nightmare quoted above. Lindstromberg (2001) surveyed ELL dictionaries and found that they covered the literal meanings (space, location, direction) of prepositions but neglected the metaphorical meanings. Prepositions used metaphorically, as in *beyond comprehension* and *behind a candidate*, were poorly represented in the most popular ELL dictionaries Lindstromberg surveyed.

Ferris (1999) labeled errors with prepositions “untreatable” because the system is so idiosyncratic, similar to idioms, and dependent on a certain amount of knowledge about the language. Examining various types of corrective feedback to intermediate ELL students, Bitchener, Young, and Cameron (2005) focused on the three most common errors of their subject pool, preposi-

tional errors being the most common type: 29% of all errors were omission or misuse of a preposition. Bitchener et al. found that while teacher feedback was associated with immediate improvement in the other error types, e.g., past tense markers and direct article use, prepositional errors were more resistant. Further, improvements were not evident until at least eight weeks into the study. Their results support Ferris' view of prepositional errors as "untreatable."

Inagaki (2002) found that Japanese speakers learning English reduce both location and directional prepositions to location uses. In comprehension tests, the subjects consistently processed a directional use of a motion verb plus preposition as a location meaning, e.g., *John swam under the bridge* was processed as a location statement rather than a goal, a direction to which John is headed. These data are in contrast to native English speakers, who recognize both meanings of the preposition.

Exploring Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) lessons in the use of English prepositions, Lo, Wang, and Yeh (2004) found improvement in ELL students' use of prepositions when the lessons required students to assign a confidence rating to their choice of preposition. The active and interactive nature of the lessons was cited as helpful to learning here.

Mwangi (2004) compared British English to the form of English spoken in Kenya by most of the population as a second language: Kenyan English. This research found a simplification of the prepositional system and a generalization of prepositional uses. The distinction between *on* and *onto* is one of location vs. direction. In Kenyan English, location is used for both, with *on* being used in both cases: *the box is on the table*, but also *light falls on the water*; *put the sling on your arm*. The distinction between *in* and *into* (again, location vs. direction) is simplified to the locative *in*: *coming in the country*; *fall in the trap*. This simplification echoes the findings of Inagaki.

British English use of *at* and *on* is generalized to *in* by Kenyan English: *in the party*, *in the island*. Some prepositions are rare or

have disappeared altogether in Kenyan English: *off*, *down*, *underneath*, *beneath*, and *past*. *Down*, for example, is used in the literal sense but not metaphorically as in *down the road*. *Beneath* and *underneath* are both replaced with *under*. *Past* is used in the temporal sense but not spatially.

Mwangi posited a leveling out of the semantic distinctions in Kenyan English. The prepositions have an expanded functional load and are doing double-duty. There are fewer synonyms, more generalization and simplification, but apparently no loss of communicative effectiveness. This last point is crucial, for language change is often met with prescriptive resistance. However, if communication is not impaired, there is little argument against change. Indeed, English today is communicatively effective with its lack of noun declensions and irregular plurals and tense markers.

Romaine (2000) studied the language Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea. Tok Pisin is, simultaneously, a lingua franca, pidgin, creole, first and second language for many speakers. A creolized English language, it demonstrates the trait of creole languages in general, by making use of a leaner, more all-purpose category of few prepositions, compared to the superstrate language (the language that contributed most of the vocabulary). Tok Pisin has two main prepositions that are used for multiple meanings: *long* and *bilong*. So we have *Mi go long taun* (*I went to town*) as well as *Haus bilong papa bilong mi* (*The house of the father of me*). Creole languages are often cited by linguists as representing the universal structure of human language. Despite location and influences, many creoles “make do” with a small number of prepositions. The argument could be made that creoles reflect the origins of language, with an accelerated rate of development, weeding out changes associated with generations of speakers.

OLD ENGLISH

In our review of the literature on English prepositions, we wanted to look historically at the English prepositional system. Kitson (1993) documented that Old English allowed for variation in what

case a preposition required in the prepositional phrase; the cases depended on whether the meaning of the preposition was spatial, temporal, or metaphorical. (There were also regional dialectal differences found.) The preposition *with*, for example, could take a genitive, dative, or accusative noun to follow, depending on the phrase's meaning. Today, except for the genitive as in *to Mary's* and *a friend of mine*, English prepositions take an object noun phrase. Old English, then, shows a richer, more complex prepositional system, in contrast to the simplified modern system.

NON-STANDARD USAGES OF PREPOSITIONS

Dialect differences in prepositions in contemporary English have already been documented. English dialects vary from the standard dialect form at all linguistic levels. Style guides prefer *different from* over *different than* (e.g., Strunk, White, and Kalman, 2005); usage, however, varies. Crystal (2004) documents some non-standard prepositional uses in a northeast region of England: *going up my mate's house* and *got off of the bus* (p. 482). Additional variants commonly heard include *based on/based off of* and *wait in line/wait on line*.

OUR STUDY

We have both worked for many years teaching undergraduates and working with essay writing. It has just been in the last few years, however, that we have encountered prepositional uses that surprise us. Reading papers by native English speaking students, we were again and again puzzled by what we, also native speakers, considered misuse of prepositions. Our examples are from writing assignments completed by native American English-speaking, traditional aged students at Marymount Manhattan College.

Of the 88 examples of non-standard prepositional use recorded, 73% involve misuse of only seven prepositions: *to*, *in*, *on*, *with*, *about*, *of*, and *for*. Most errors are in utterances where the preposition carries a metaphorical meaning. We label these prepositions as demonstrating low-semantic loads. Therefore, where a preposition

is used to indicate a concrete location (*in the store*), directional use (*to the store*), or temporal use (*at 7p.m.*), we find few errors. Only in one case was the ill-formed preposition used to indicate direction ?*I arrived to school*.¹

Table 1 gives a breakdown of errors for the most frequently occurring individual prepositions in our examples. The “greater than” symbol indicates the direction of substitution. For example, the preposition *to* shifted to another preposition 15 times or 17% of the total 88 sentences collected. *To* was itself the replacement for different prepositions 13 times or 15% of the total examples.

TABLE 1:
Data on prepositional shifts

| Preposition | Preposition > X* | | X* > Preposition | |
|-------------|------------------|------------|------------------|------------|
| | Examples | Percentage | Examples | Percentage |
| TO | 15 | 17% | 13 | 15% |
| IN | 14 | 16% | 7 | 8% |
| ON | 4 | 5% | 17 | 19% |
| WITH | 8 | 9% | 5 | 6% |
| ABOUT | 11 | 13% | 0 | 0% |
| OF | 11 | 13% | 10 | 11% |
| FOR | 2 | 2% | 9 | 10% |

* *X* represents any other preposition.

Some patterns emerged. Most striking are the data on the preposition *about*, which carries a fairly consistent primary meaning (e.g. concerning, relating to, in reference to) as in these examples: *to talk about, the report is about, a book about*. The target preposition *about* has been replaced with substitutes, namely *of, on, with, and to*, in all our examples. No errors involved a substitution to *about*.

Examples:

1. ?My mother received a phone call on my behavior.

1 The question mark indicates structures judged ill formed by native speakers. For this project the authors used their judgments of English to determine an utterance ill or well formed.

2. ?This made me think more to my everyday classroom experience.

3. ?They had concerns on raising their children bilingual.

The substitution of *about* by *on*, in the last sentence above, may be attributed to semantic similarity. The shared concept of “pertaining to, concerning” is illustrated by the pairs below. The use of either preposition creates a well-formed phrase, and the pairs evince little semantic distinctiveness. In other words, either preposition works:

1. There’s a report on TV about the Iraqi War.

There’s a report on TV on the Iraqi War.

2. Do you have any books on homelessness?

Do you have any books about homelessness?

Another impetus for students’ preference could be the slightly more formal style of *on*. Students might judge the phrase *an article on prepositions* to be more scholarly than *an article about prepositions*.

The data on *in* also reveal a significant trend. There are twice as many examples of *in* being replaced (16%) than of *in* replacing another preposition (8%). Conversely, the data indicate that the use of *on* as a replacement preposition is increasing: in 19% of the samples, other prepositions were omitted in favor of *on*. Not surprisingly, *in* is often replaced by the semantically and phonetically similar *on* as seen in these student examples:

1. ?the latest trends on technology

2. ?to further indulge on

For also seems to be spreading, being replaced in only 2% of the samples but supplanting other prepositions (*to*, *in*, *of*, and *with*) in 10% of the samples, as seen below.

1. ?look forward for

2. ?participate for

3. ?purpose for

4. ?sympathize for

Like target *to*, *for* gives a goal, but more often in the sense of “why,” as seen in its conjunctive use: Speak now, *for* there is no time to lose. Other examples of *for* with this meaning include *a reason for*, *wait for*, *fight for*, and *search for*.

In other cases, the substitutions do not indicate an increase or decrease in use. *Of* is replaced by other prepositions (*on, for, from, for, with, to, at, in*) in 13% of the samples and used in place of another preposition (*to, about, for, in, on, of, with*) in 11% of the sentences. With targets *for* and *to*, exchanges exist in both directions: students use *for* where we would use *to* and vice versa. The lack of a pattern indicates confusion among English speakers, a sign that the system is in flux.

Many changes in usage appear to be based on analogy. For example, a student who writes *purpose for* might be using this structure with the analogous *reason for* in mind. Table 2 contains students' prepositional errors and the possible analogies that prompted them.

TABLE 2:

Analogies underlying prepositional shifts

| Preposition & Possible Analogy | Example |
|--------------------------------|---|
| OF > FOR reason for | Cones and rods in the retina have the sole purpose for deciphering color. |
| FOR > OF convinced of | His first conviction was of having pornographic pictures of minors. |
| TO > OF warn them of | That alerted them of incoming stock quotes |
| OF > TO objection to | He couldn't live down her rejection to him. |
| WITH > OF tired of | They were bored of reading |
| TO > WITH unconcerned with | We become indifferent with society |
| WITH > TO familiar to us | We are familiar to the term |
| TO > FROM expected from | It's due from simple error |
| FROM > TO put a stop to | Stop the language to adopting new words |

At this stage, we are able to draw a few tentative conclusions:

- The system of prepositions in American English is in flux, and the most frequently used prepositions are the most affected.
- Some simplification exists, such as the loss of directional variants *into* and *onto*, as well as the reduced use of *about* and *in*.
- In metaphoric uses, the prepositional substitutions are heavily influenced by analogy of semantically similar constructions: *purpose of* / *reason for*; *bored with* / *tired of*.

APPLICATION TO TEACHING

English prepositions have long tortured ELL students and teachers alike. The traditional approach focuses on illustrations of basic spatial use, then memorization of metaphoric use. Students are encouraged to create lexical entries including the preposition, e.g., *interested in*, *bored with* or to memorize sentences, *I am interested in boxing*.

Researchers, on the other hand, have advocated teaching students a primary spatial meaning to which they can relate more abstract meanings. Lindstromberg (1996) illustrates this approach with the preposition *on*, which he suggests has the primary meaning of “contact of an object with a line or surface” (p. 229). He advises students to view the metaphoric use, the *engine died on us*, as indicating contact of an event (*engine died*) with a person (*on us*).

Such advice is aimed at teachers who work with ELL students. What of those teachers involved in developmental education for native English speaking students? How do we “correct” forms that are in line with a native speaker’s linguistic competence?

While we have yet to discover a simple solution, we would like to suggest some strategies for all teachers and other professionals for the near future:

- *Distinguish between language change and bad grammar*: Instructors should explain the concept of language change and the prepositional shift currently in progress. Thus, students would become more aware of the nature of language

and not view their choice of preposition as yet another grammar mistake.

- *Making students aware:* Instructors should call attention to prepositional use in readings and student writing, encouraging students to make their own list of preposition-verb pairs. Prepositions are often ignored as “small words” of little importance; however, as students begin to focus attention on pairs of verb and preposition, they will be better equipped to recognize their own errors. When students learn new vocabulary, they need to be encouraged to include a sentence using the new lexical item in their notebooks or on flashcards.
- *Track language change among new generations:* Instructors should understand the possible discrepancy between their students’ sense of the prepositional system, both native and non-native speakers, and their own understanding of English. Instructors should also note consistencies in students’ use of prepositions to keep abreast of accepted doubles. For instance, *based off of* is currently widely accepted, whereas *afraid from* is not. By collecting examples, instructors will gain sufficient knowledge of trends in preposition use.
- *Use supplemental tools:* Until reference grammars contain an expanded section on prepositions, including verb and preposition pairs as well as commonly misused prepositions, teachers should supplement their materials with such information, culled from student papers. An excellent source of standard usage is *Perfect Prepositions* by Galina Kimber.

CONCLUSION

Our research so far validates Connell’s (as cited in Mwangi, 2004) belief that the English prepositional system is complex and difficult to master. Contemporary dialect differences have been documented, and writing pedagogy aims to eradicate any variation. Our own observations confirm a contemporary prepositional system in flux. English has already lost various grammatical distinctions: we no longer decline nouns to distinguish case or gender; we have a

relatively simple verb conjugation system; the subjunctive mood is rarely used; and case markings on pronouns are notoriously in flux, the *who/whom* distinction being lost and the differences between *I* and *me* being simplified to *myself*.

It would not be surprising, then, that distinctions among prepositions are being neutralized, especially where they carry a low semantic load. At the moment, two generations – we, the teachers, and our students – are at different stages in our linguistic competence about prepositions. Future research should focus on the exact changes occurring, in terms of spatial, locative, directional, and metaphorical use of prepositions. Researchers should look at prepositions not just from a syntactic viewpoint, but also in terms of the semantic relations that the prepositional phrase conveys. So while *to the doctor* contains a noun phrase that is syntactically object case, the semantic function of the noun is one of goal. We also should examine any differences between spoken and written use of prepositions.

As academics trained in the descriptive, anti-prescriptive discipline of linguistics, we are in a position to note these changes without inferring lack of English skills on the part of our students. Furthermore, we consider dialect differences that diverge from Standard American English a natural part of a language's organic nature. We raise the issue of the current state of prepositions as evidence that language constantly changes, and that good teachers are attuned to the linguistic competence of their students.

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